

Read this fictionalized account of how the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, California was built. As you read the story, think about whether or not Simon, a character in the story, achieved personal success.

# Beautiful Junk

## A STORY OF THE WATTS TOWERS

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PHOTOS by Barbara Jacobs and Lou Jacobs, Jr.

Charlie didn't notice the colours of the sun setting behind the telephone lines. The alley was cool and dark in the shadows of evening. Charlie crouched near some trash cans and raised a steel pipe high above his head.

"Junk, dirty junk!" he growled. And the pipe hit the waiting bottle, exploding glass in a hundred directions.

Pipe in hand, Charlie moved through the shadows to a trash can where he took another bottle. Crouching, he put it on the pavement. "Junk, junk, dirty junk!" he shouted, his pipe striking again and again. Then he pounded the pavement harder and yelled louder, "Junk! Junk! Dirty, dirty junk!"

Charlie was so busy pounding and shouting, he didn't notice the old man who came around the corner pushing a wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow was full of empty bottles, rusted wire, and other junk collected from the back alleys.

The old man stopped and watched. When Charlie was tired of banging, he looked up. He was surprised and frightened. The old man was looking down at him.

### Ask Yourself

Why do you think Charlie is smashing the bottles?

### GOALS AT A GLANCE

thinking about setting • analysing characters



### Creating Realistic Dialogue

As you read on, notice how this writer has used an apostrophe to shorten some words: 'em. The author is trying to create realistic dialogue.



### Ask Yourself

Do you think Charlie is right? Why or why not?

"W-w-what do you want?" Charlie stammered.

"Some bottles and wire," said the old man in a quiet voice. "But I see you've broken all the bottles. Did you see any wire in the trash cans?"

"Why do you want bottles and wire?" asked Charlie. "You get money for 'em?"

"No," answered the old man.

Then he bent over and looked at the broken pieces of glass at Charlie's feet.

"May I have some of these?" he asked.

"You want that junk?" Charlie asked, sneering in disbelief. "Sure, take it."

The old man picked out pieces of blue, green, and rust-coloured glass. Then he took a brown bag from his pocket, unfolded it, and carefully placed the pieces of glass inside.

"Man, who ever heard of collectin' busted-up glass," said Charlie.

"Some of these pieces are beautiful. You broke them into fine shapes."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Charlie with a laugh. "You must be blind. That glass is junk. Ugly junk, like everything in this alley, and everything in your broken-down old wheelbarrow."

The old man looked at his wheelbarrow, then he looked at Charlie.

"Maybe you're right," he said. He bent over the wheelbarrow and started down the shadowy alley.

A few days later, as Charlie left school with his friend Sammy, he saw the old man across the street. The old man's wheelbarrow was heaped full of broken dishes and rusted pipes, and tied on the top was a metal gate.

Charlie pointed. "He thinks broken junk is beautiful." Then cupping his hands to his mouth, Charlie shouted, "Beautiful junk! Beautiful junk! Crazy old man thinks junk is beautiful!"

The boys laughed and jeered. The old man walked on.

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Charlie didn't see the old man again for many weeks, and he had almost forgotten about him. Then one day, while he was eating lunch with Sammy, Charlie saw the old man pushing his empty wheelbarrow outside the school fence.

"There he is!" Charlie pointed. "Let's follow him!"



"We can't!" exclaimed Sammy. "We got to stay in school!"  
 "I'm not stayin'. Come on, now's our chance!" Charlie insisted.

"And get picked up by the police for cuttin', not me!" Sammy answered.

"Okay, if you're scared, I'll follow him myself," said Charlie, and he climbed the fence and started after the old man.

Charlie stayed a good distance behind so he wouldn't be seen. The old man turned into an alley and stopped by some trash cans. Carefully, he looked through the things in one of the cans. He chose a bottle, held it up to the sun, spun it around, laughed and mumbled, and placed it in his wheelbarrow.

He's a crazy man for sure, thought Charlie. I better not let him catch me.

The school bell rang in the distance. Suddenly, it was quiet in the alley. Charlie was crouching and hiding, while the old man was staring at the bottle.

The old man looked in another trash can and found some pieces of broken tile. At another trash can he picked out a cookie cutter shaped like a heart. And so it went, from trash can to trash can, and from alley to alley, Charlie followed the old man as he collected dozens of discarded pieces of once-useful things.

Down one street, around a corner, down another street, through traffic, across railroad tracks, Charlie followed the old man. He was in a neighbourhood he'd never seen before. A police car went by. Charlie's breath caught in his chest as he ducked behind a telephone pole.

When he looked out from his hiding place, the police car was gone and so was the old man who had disappeared around the corner. Charlie ran. He rushed around the corner. Crash! He ran right into the wheelbarrow, which tipped over with a bang. Junk flew everywhere, and Charlie fell to the sidewalk.

"Why have you followed me?" demanded the old man, looking down at Charlie and waving his hand.

"I-I-I didn't. You can't prove it," Charlie stammered, scrambling to his feet.

"All right," said the old man in a more gentle voice, and he bent over and began reloading the wheelbarrow. "I just thought you were following me and I wondered why."

Charlie saw that the old man wasn't going to hurt him, so he confessed. "I did follow you. I wanted to see where you take the junk you collect."

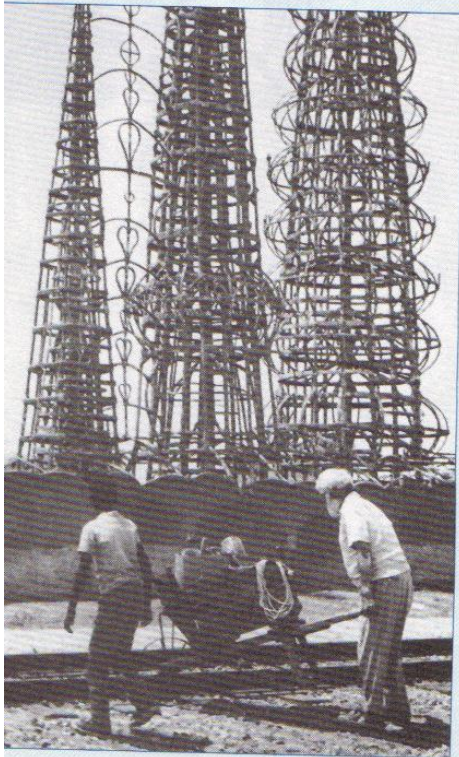
"Oh no, I can't let you find out," said the old man.





**Ask Yourself**

Why do you think Simon agrees to show Charlie what he does with the junk?



"Why not?" asked Charlie.

"You're a crazy boy! You like busting and shooting and breaking everything. You might break my things."

"I don't care," answered Charlie, but he really did care, and he bent over and helped reload the wheelbarrow.

The old man was silent. They worked side by side until the wheelbarrow was full. Then he asked, "If I show you, will you promise never to come and break any of my things?"

"I-I-I promise," said Charlie, but he wasn't sure if he meant it.

"I'm Simon," said the old man softly.

"I'm Charlie."

The old man turned, bent over, took the handles of the wheelbarrow in his strong hands, and began to walk and hum. Charlie followed a few steps behind, wondering, Is he crazy? If he is, where is he leading me?

They went a few more blocks and came to some railroad tracks. They crossed the tracks and then Charlie saw, rising high in the air, three tall, pointed towers. They looked like colourful fairy tale towers. He had never seen anything like them before.

The old man pushed his wheelbarrow along the strange wall that enclosed the towers. He unlocked a gate and went in. Charlie followed, his heart beating fast with fear and excitement.

Everywhere Charlie looked, there were strange structures made of cement and decorated with hundreds of pieces of tile, broken glass, parts of bottles, and whole seashells. And the cement itself had many designs cut into it. There were designs made by cookie cutters and by records and many other things Charlie recognized. It was a magic land. So many colours and circles and arches and shapes, and high above them all were the three tall towers.

"Do you see the junk?" the old man asked as he began unloading the wheelbarrow. "This is where I bring it."

"Here?" asked Charlie in disbelief. "No way. You don't bring it here. This place is cleaner than my house Saturday morning after we vacuum, sweep, and dust."

"I use it to build, to build the towers and all the things you see. I'm a poor man. I can't buy things to build with. So I build with things from trash cans, vacant lots, and junkyards. Things people think are no good. I make those things into something beautiful."



Charlie gazed about for a long time without saying anything. He didn't know what he expected when he followed the old man, but he certainly didn't expect this.

The old man smiled when he saw how excited Charlie was.

"You can look around," he said, "but remember your promise."

Charlie nodded and started off to explore.

The old man mixed some water, sand, and cement in a large bucket. He carried the heavy bucket, some broken tiles, and some bottle ends over to a corner. He smeared the wet cement on the wall. Then he pressed the bits of broken tile into the soft cement. Charlie came over and watched.

"Would you hand me those bottle ends?" asked the old man. "I'll put them here next to the tile."

Charlie handed him the bottle ends. He liked the flower the old man was making.

"Did you make all this yourself?" he asked.

"All of it," said the old man. "I put in every stone, tile, bottle, shell, design, and shape...everything."

"Man!" declared Charlie. "You musta' worked a long time."

"More than 30 years," said the old man, and he smeared more fresh cement on the wall.

"How did you build those high towers?" Charlie asked.

"I made them strong with metal, wire, and cement. I climbed up, building as I climbed. Sometimes I took my lunch up with me."

"Can I climb them?" Charlie asked, eagerly looking up at the tallest tower.

"Go ahead. Use the ladders I built into the towers, and be careful," warned the old man.

So Charlie began to climb the highest tower. He wanted to go to the very top. But when he was about halfway up, he looked down. The ground was far below him. The old man looked very small. Charlie waved down to him, and he didn't climb any higher.

After Charlie climbed back down, he asked, "When you're finished, will you sell it?"

The old man laughed. "No, no, I didn't build this to sell."

"Then why'd you build it?"

"Because," began the old man. Then he paused. Slowly he looked all about him, at all the wonderful things he had made. "Because I wanted to build something beautiful."

Charlie wasn't sure he understood why someone would work for so long just to build something beautiful. But he was sure he liked what the old man had built.

## POSTSCRIPT

The towers which Charlie discovered in the story actually exist. They can be seen in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, where they were built by a man named Simon Rodia who came to America from Italy.

Simon Rodia was a poor man who worked as a tile setter. He liked to read about heroes like Marco Polo, Columbus, and Galileo. Once he said that a person has to do "good good or bad bad to be remembered." Maybe it was because Simon Rodia wanted to be remembered for doing something very good that he worked for 33 years to build the towers. Perhaps he also built the towers to remind him of similar towers in his native Italy. He often said the towers were a gift to his new country.

Simon Rodia worked all alone. He used only the simple tools of a tile setter and the belt and bucket of a window washer. For building materials, he collected more than 70 000 seashells, dismantled pipe structures and steel bed frames, and salvaged countless tiles and bottles.

Today, people come from all over the world to gaze and wonder at Simon Rodia's towers. Pictures of the towers appear in magazines from Tokyo to Paris. Simon Rodia's dream has come true. He is remembered for something "good good," something beautiful.



# A

## UNDERSTANDING THE SELECTION *Thinking About Setting*

1. a. Underline two or three lines at the beginning of the story that give you information about the **setting**.
- b. Underline two or three lines at the end of the story that give you information about the **setting**.
- c. How does the setting of the story change?

The **setting** of a story is where and when it takes place. The setting can include information about the place and the time in which the story happens.

2. How important is the setting to the story? Explain.

# B

## CRITICAL THINKING *Analysing Characters*

1. Throughout the story, the reader is given information about Charlie and Simon. Complete this chart, listing words to describe Charlie and words to describe Simon.

Charlie	Simon

2. How does Charlie change during the story? What causes that change?



3. When you read stories, do you usually consider their setting and characters? Suggest **one** reason to keep either setting or characters in mind as you read a story.



**D**

# LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS *Plural Nouns*

- A **noun** names a person, place, or thing. A **singular noun** names one person, place, or thing.  
EXAMPLES: wheelbarrow, bottle, tower
- A **plural noun** names more than one person, place, or thing.  
EXAMPLES: boys, alleys, handles, CDs
- Add **-s** to most nouns to make them plural.  
EXAMPLES: wheelbarrows, bottles, DVDs
- Add **-es** to most nouns that end in **-ss, -x, -s, -ch, or -sh** to make them plural.  
EXAMPLES: dress — dresses    box — boxes    bus — buses  
                  arch — arches    dish — dishes
- When a noun ends in a **consonant + y**, change the **-y** to **-i** and add **-es**.  
EXAMPLE: cherry — cherries
- When a noun ends in a **vowel + y**, add **-s**.  
EXAMPLE: alley — alleys
- Some nouns have **irregular plural** forms.  
EXAMPLES: woman — women    knife — knives    leaf — leaves

1. Write the plural form of each word below.

- |                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| a. piece _____  | i. promise _____ |
| b. glass _____  | j. lunch _____   |
| c. tile _____   | k. sky _____     |
| d. pulley _____ | l. hero _____    |
| e. brush _____  | m. ax _____      |
| f. gas _____    | n. day _____     |
| g. shape _____  | o. person _____  |
| h. man _____    | p. candy _____   |

2. Complete the following sentences with the correct spelling of the plural noun.

- a. They crossed the \_\_\_\_\_ (trackes, tracks) to the towers.
- b. Charlie found two \_\_\_\_\_ (boxs, boxes) containing pieces of tile.
- c. We've had many good \_\_\_\_\_ (lunchs, lunches) in that diner.
- d. The \_\_\_\_\_ (photoes, photos) were taken by Barbara Jacobs and Lou Jacobs, Jr.
- e. We made it all \_\_\_\_\_ (ourselves, ourselves).
- f. The movie and music \_\_\_\_\_ (industrys, industries) have been affected by Internet downloading.